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STATE FOR WHA, WHA/CAR, INR/IAA;
NSC STAFF FOR LATIN AMERICA ADVISOR;
USSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD;

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN POLITICS II #7: PRD EXPELS A MAVERICK
AND A DESERTER

11. This is the seventh cable in a series reporting on the second year of the administration of Dominican president Leonel Fernandez.

PRD Expels a Maverick and a Deserter

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Months after Senator Ramiro Espino of Samana Province and Senator Tonty Rutinel Dominguez of Santo Domingo stopped cooperating with the party, the main opposition PRD has now formally expelled them. At the PRD national executive committee November 2, most of the 1400 members present voted for the party leadership's motion, although not without noisy objections from Rutinel supporters. PRD secretary general Orlando Jorge Mera said the party, in response to pressure from the rank and file, was applying "a hard line against indiscipline." Indeed, Rutinel had been loudly booed at the party's last delegates, convention in July.

This decision slightly erodes the PRD's majority in the Senate, with 27 instead of 29 senators out of 32. Many observers believe the PRD will lose far more legislative seats in the elections next May. PRD domination of Congress has caused repeated problems for the Fernandez administration by delaying bills such as the ratification of DR-CAFTA, the regional free trade agreement.

Why did two senior PRD legislators with established constituencies voluntarily renounce their privileged party roles?

Senator Espino, Senate tourism committee chairman, defected last February to join the newly established Social Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRSD) of renegade former PRD leader Hatuey de Camps. Continuing to hold his Senate seat, Espino has excellent prospects of running for reelection under the new banner, drawing on a provincial constituency whose interests he has consistently defended. In 2004 he vigorously politicized the deposit of rockash from Puerto Rico along the shore of Samana and participated in a special Congressional committee to investigate the issue. The only senator to follow Hatuey as a founding member of the PRSD, Espino may also have improved his prospects for other high-profile positions, including a possible vice presidential candidacy on the PRSD ticket in 2008.

More confrontational, Tonty Rutinel, has until now served as chairman of the Senate national security and public order committee. With 37 years in the PRD, he has repeatedly defied party leaders on key issues. In 2002 he opposed the constitutional amendment that allowed Hipolito Mejia to run for reelection as president; in 2003 he successfully opposed the PRD's candidate for speaker of the lower house of Congress and gained election for his own candidate, Alfredo Pacheco. He was against accepting Mejia's intimate Hernani Salazar to fill a vacant PRD seat in the Senate in 2004 and accused Salazar of spreading bribes to "buy" his seat. He opposed ratification of DR-CAFTA in 2005 as "an irresponsible move by the Government and the Senate, which will harm national production."

Rutinel has a history of resigning in disgust -- from the chair of the Bicameral Committee for Reform and Modernization of the Congress last year because of alleged Mejia administration collusion with corrupt practices, and, more recently, from the PRD's vice presidency, political committee, and national executive committee because he believed the new party leadership was imposed by Mejia and his cronies. In a moment of candor in July, the feisty senator told a journalist, "In the Senate, they're tired of me, and I'm tired of them." He requested a "leave of absence" from the Senate.

But this is not the whole story. As the election pre-campaign heats up, electoral calculations are involved, and Hatuey appears to be influencing them. In Rutinel's letter of resignation from the PRD and the Senate, published November 1 by the electronic journal Clave Digital, Rutinel said he was reacting to efforts by "two or three party leaders" to block his intended candidacy for reelection to the Senate -- otherwise "a sure thing" based on his 60-70% poll ratings in the nation's most populous province.

According to Clave Digital, Hatuey Decamps recently said he had offered Tonty the PRSD senatorial candidacy for Santo Domingo. In July, Rutinel reflected wistfully, "I am and will always be a perredesta despite saying good-bye," and he undertook to "retire to my house and do social work." We read this with skepticism. To justify switching parties, all Tonty would have to do is adopt Hatuey,s line that the PRSD represents the "real PRD," true to the ideals of the late Pena Gomez.

If Hatuey launches two credible senatorial candidates, he will chip away at the massive PRD electoral base. A possible and often rumored alliance of the PRSD with the ruling PLD, in turn, could be a multiplier for Hatuey,s limited forces and cause concern to PRD leaders as they seek to protect their redoubts in Congress.

12. (U) Drafted by Bainbridge Cowell.

13. (U) This piece and others in our series can be consulted at our SIPRNET web site
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodmingo> along
with extensive other material.
HERTELL